



[Ousmane Sembène, 1923 - 2007](#)

Ousmane Sembène

The 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, when the majority of African former colonies regained their national sovereignty, were also the boom years for the paperback book-publishing business worldwide.

Companies such as Penguin Books and Heinemann popularised many African authors in English, or in English translation during this time.

[Ousmane Sembène](#)'s 1960 "[God's Bits of Wood](#)", written in French and first published only 15 years after the end of the anti-fascist world war, has an outstanding place in the history of the African revolutionary novel. The download linked below contains characteristic extracts from the novel.

As you will see later in this course, Ngugi wa Thiong'o mentioned "God's Bits of Wood" in the final chapter of his great novel "Petals of Blood", and also in his famous critical essay "The Writer in a Neo-colonial State".

The novel is about a strike among railway workers on the line between Dakar, Senegal, and Bamako, Mali, in the time of the French colonial empire, and is based on a real strike that took place in 1947. It is a wonderful story, full of characterisation, events and atmosphere. It is optimistic and full of hope. Large parts of “[God’s Bits of Wood](#)” can be read on [Google Books](#).

Ousmane Sembène was also an outstanding film-maker. According to his Wikipedia entry, “he realized that his written works would only be read by a small cultural elite in his native land. He therefore decided at age 40 to become a film maker, in order to reach wider African audiences.” For similar reasons, Ngugi was later to return to writing in his native language, Kikuyu.

Ousmane Sembène died in his eighties, in 2007.

Did the African writers create a “*genre*”? At least one could say that they were typically open and keen to portray life and personalities as they were. They represented a revolutionary, generally optimistic (but sometimes tinged with disillusion) popular imagination that was widespread in those years, at least among African intellectuals. One of the highlights of those years was “FESTAC”, The Second World African Festival of Arts and Culture, held in Nigeria in 1977, where the young Fela Kuti played, among others.

Is there continuity today? No. It is not the same today. Culture is now more “globalised”, as a result of a reactionary, neo-

liberal offensive. The paperback book does not have the same high place in popular culture as it did in the past. The sense of a general African anti-Imperialist popular cultural wave has lost some of its momentum, for the time being.

But we are working on the problems! And Ousmane Sembène's masterpiece, "God's Bits of Wood", remains an inspiration to us.

- The above is to introduce the original reading-texts: [Ousmane Sembène, God's Bits of Wood, extracts, 1960.](#)
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